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Scholars, unionists and bosses debate collective bargaining

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In the wake of Guangdong's decision to postpone new collective bargaining legislation, a conference in Hong Kong yesterday discussed the key issues surrounding collective bargaining and the future of labour relations in China.

Jointly organized by Hong Kong University and Shenzhen University, the conference was attended by scholars, lawyers, workers, labour activists and representatives of the business community from mainland China and Hong Kong.

Several delegates expressed concern over the pay and working conditions of migrant workers in China, and their current inability to negotiate decent pay for decent work with their employers.

A worker from a Hong Kong-owned enterprise in Shenzhen described how the company's code of conduct, which was designed to protect workers' rights and even included their right to collective bargaining, was basically ignored by management, which refused to discuss pay and conditions with the employees.

The lack of a genuine trade union that could conduct collective bargaining on behalf the workers was another major issue of concern, with delegates stressing that a collective bargaining system would only be effective if the workers themselves exercised their rights under the law and actively participate in the system.

China Labour Bulletin Director Han Dongfang argued that employers who currently resolutely oppose collective bargaining because they fear it will increase costs should consider the advantages it could actually bring to their bottom-line. Why, he asked, do exporters have such low profit margins? Government taxation was one reason, he said, but just as important was the pressure exerted by multinational buyers. And the establishment of a collective bargaining mechanism, Han argued, would enable Chinese manufacturers to demand a much better deal from those same multinational corporations.

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